



National Foundation for Educational Research

Evaluation of Integrated Children's Centres in Wales

Final Report

February 2010

WIC

Contents

1.	Summary of key findings	5
2.	Introduction	9
3.	Aims and methodology	10
	3.1 Aims and objectives	
	3.2 Sample	
	3.3 Conducting the research	
4.	Awareness, Mission and Management	12
	4.1 Development in awareness	
	4.2 Changes to mission and needs analysis	
	4.3 Nature and outcomes of monitoring and inspection	
	4.5 Changes to staffing profile	
5.	Provision in services for children	16
	5.1 Childcare	
	5.2 Early years	
	5.3 Open Access Play	
	5.4 Training for parents	
6.	Impact	21
	6.1 Monitoring impact	
	6.2 Impact on services and partnership working	
	6.3 Impact on children	
	6.4 Bilingual development	
	6.5 Diet and health	
	6.6 Open access play	
	6.7 Impact on parents and families	
	6.8 Impact on the community and economy	
7.	Sustainability	38
	7.1 Funding	
	7.2 Staffing	

1. Summary of key findings

These findings relate to the four case study Integrated Children's Centres (ICCs) that were the focus of NFER's research:

ICCs are addressing the needs of children, parents and communities

Childcare, early years provision and opportunities for adults to learn and access services are essential features of the way that the ICCs meet the needs of parents and the local community. The ICC approach includes a strong focus on promoting multi-agency working, signposting services, and facilitating access to support. The provision of Open Access Play is more limited and ICCs are developing ways of increasing Open Access Play facilities and activities.

The ICCs enable the effective delivery of a range of services including Flying Start and Health Visitor activities by giving practitioners access to better facilities and a range of organisations that work with the local community. The ICCs also offer quality venues in which to deliver education and training courses.

The ICCs have increased access to quality child care and early years provision to local communities. They have also developed effective working relationships with local schools and the Foundation phase of the curriculum. Effective practice is identified where such provision is linked to the wider Foundation Phase, for example where links have been established between the ICCs and local schools. Childcare sufficiency assessments show an increase in the demand for services that are provided.

ICCs have a range of positive impacts on the development of children

Children who attend the ICCs have enhanced social and cognitive skills. As a result of attending activities at the centres, children are more sociable and interact in a more appropriate way with peers and adults. The increased sociability and confidence of children who attended the centres is related to the supportive and caring approach of ICC staff.

Strong links with primary schools affiliated to the ICCs improve the extent to which children are prepared for schools. The positive discipline at the ICCs also supports children's transition from the Centres to school and improves their behaviour. The bilingual development of children and the local community has been facilitated through the Welsh medium provision at the ICCs to varying degrees, depending on the amount of Welsh that is naturally spoken in the host communities. In areas where

fewer people speak Welsh, there was an interest for more Welsh courses for parents and staff.

The ICCs involve beneficiaries and local communities in identifying local needs and developing activities at the centres

Beneficiaries and the wider community are involved in identifying needs in all four ICCs. There was extensive public consultation at the time when the centres were established. There is some concern that expectations held by local communities had exceeded what had proved to be deliverable in some instances.

The ICCs acknowledge and understand the need for on-going continuous dialogue with the communities they serve. The four ICCs had not undertaken community consultation exercises that were as detailed as the ones when the centres were first built. However, at the present time, variety of methods are used to gather feedback about the centres, including formal questionnaires and informal dialogue with individuals and organisations, in order to assess what the communities need and want from the ICCs. Low levels of literacy among some parents using the ICCs are a barrier to gathering more detailed written feedback.

There is a high level of community ownership of the centres

ICCs aim to engage users and community representatives in the management structures of the centres. They have also formed links with organisations such as Communities First partnerships. ICCs have been effective in involving users and local community groups that work with children in their management committees, which has increased ownership of the centres. Extending engagement within the centres and ownership to the broader community has proved more challenging, but the Centres have made progress in this area. The ICCs benefit all of the communities where they are located. A collective sense of pride and self-esteem in the centres demonstrates the value of the ICCs to the communities where they are located.

ICCs have a positive impact on parents and families

Participating in education and training courses at the ICCs had led to a number of parents gaining qualifications and employment. The childcare provision at the centres enables many parents to attend education and training courses.

The physical and psychological health of parents and families using the ICCs has improved as a result of participating in activities and health awareness projects that

are delivered at the centres. Participation in these activities has increased as a result of the range of projects and service providers being based at the centres. Participation in these projects is influenced by the non-threatening environment of the ICCs and the welcoming and supportive attitudes of staff.

The ICCs provide a relaxing and pleasant place to interact socially with other parents, which reduces the social isolation experienced by many people who live in communities where the ICCs are located. Parenting classes for fathers are provided in some of the ICCs but there remains an outstanding need for more of these classes in other areas.

The centres encourage multi-agency working

Centres encourage dialogues and sharing of good practice between practitioners and different service providers based. This contributes to the quality and effectiveness of the services they deliver.

The majority of the centres provide Open Access Play

Open Access Play is designed to enable children to learn and develop through play opportunities in a safe environment. It is linked to a wider range of benefits for children and communities than many other services that are based at the centres. Tolerance and inclusion are promoted through play, which helps to break down cultural barriers between communities. Three of the ICCs provided comprehensive Open Access Play and one did not have sufficient facilities to allow all children to participate in Open Access Play facilities.

There are working relationships between the ICCs and key local organisations and strategies

There is a strong understanding among key Local Authority and Voluntary sector organisations about the ways in which ICCs contribute to the delivery of local play, early years education and health promotion strategies. There are productive working relationships between the ICCs and local regeneration initiatives such as Communities First. These sometimes build on existing contact and collaboration.

The sustainability of ICCs is a key concern

The sustainability of the ICCs' services, facilities and staffing is a key concern. Decreased funding from central and local sources combined with the impact of the economic recession has made financial pressures on most of the ICCs progressively

more acute over the course of the study, despite a growing demand for the services they provide.

ICCs increasingly have to rely on short-term grants to support their activities and facilities, but these often do not cover larger and more essential costs such as staffing and insurance.

ICCs would benefit from strengthening the systematic collection of quantitative data to illustrate their impact on the local community

Although ICCs gather some qualitative data and ask for feedback about their work, there is limited evidenced of systematic systems and efforts to gather comprehensive quantitative data to monitor and evaluate their work.

Recommendations for the future

Based on the evidence gathered through this research, ICCs should be maintained and further developed in view of the benefits they provide to local children, parents and the community. Open Access Play is the core element with the greatest potential for expansion in future. Welsh language courses for parents and provision for fathers are other areas identified as future priorities for development.

2. Introduction

Integrated Children's Centres (ICCs) were developed on the understanding that the integration of services such as education, childcare, social care, parenting and family support at a single point of contact were effective ways of supporting children and their families.

The ICC programme was intended to address several aspects of public policy in Wales. These included:

- Early Years education and the expansion of the places available
- Support for families
- The play agenda
- The role of childcare in facilitating parents' entry into the job market and education

The Big Lottery Fund (BIG) supported the capital cost of building ICCs in each of the 22 Local Authorities in Wales. Decisions about their exact nature, such as location and whether to have a single centre or a satellite system were taken by Local Authorities, in accordance with funding guidelines set by BIG. Revenue funding to support the ICCs is provided by Local Authorities.

In June 2008 the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) was commissioned by BIG to undertake an evaluation of the impact of ICCs between July 2008 and December 2009. The research included three phases of fieldwork over this period. This report analyses the key research findings over this 18 month period and explores how the ICCs have developed throughout the duration of the research.

3. Aims and methodology

3.1 Aims and objectives

The overarching aim of the research was to:

‘.. assess the impact of Integrated Children’s Centres (ICCs) on the social and economic development of the local communities they serve.’

Within this overarching aim, the evaluation considers the following key research questions:

- The involvement of beneficiaries and communities in identifying local needs and in the development of the centres
- The work of the ICCs in addressing the needs of children, parents and the local community, and the community’s sense of ownership of the centres
- The benefits of the facilities and services at each ICC for children, parents and the local community
- The success of the centres in encouraging multi-agency working and their impact on the voluntary sector or community first partnerships
- The links between the ICCs and other local strategies
- The sustainability of ICCs
- The future development of ICCs.

3.2 Sample

A sample of four ICCs was selected to be representative of Wales in terms of geography, socio-economic background, and size of local population, degree of Welsh/English bilingualism and presence of ethnic minorities.

3.3 Conducting the research

The research was structured in three rounds of field research; May – September 2008, November 2008 – April 2009, and May – November 2009. Each round involved a research visit to the four case-study ICCs in the project sample. Strategic interviews were also held with representatives of the WAG and national organisations during the First Stage of the research. A focus group was held with staff at Play Wales in March 2009.

During the second and third rounds, interviews were conducted with the centre manager, staff, parents, and some of the children using the centres. The research team used Audience Response System (ARS) technology to stimulate and record the response of children in the second round. As agreed with BIG at a project review meeting held in November 2009, these interviews focused on the following aspects:

- The profile of the ICC, including developments in awareness, any changes to their mission and any further needs analysis that may have been undertaken
- Their management and operation, including the nature of any monitoring or inspection activities and their outcomes, any changes to management arrangements or the staffing profile
- How provision had developed, focusing on each of the areas of Early Years education, childcare, open access play and training for parents
- The ICCs' impact, focusing on parents, children, the community and the local economy
- Sustainability and future plans.

4. Awareness, Mission and Management

4.1 Development in awareness

All ICCs promote their facilities and services in the communities in which they were located. The type of work undertaken includes:

- use of the media, in particular local newspapers and radio stations
- formal marketing strategies developed in conjunction with local authorities
- the use of community websites
- holding fun days and other one-off events
- holding themed weeks like a ‘family learning week’
- questionnaire surveys of local residents
- publishing booklets outlining what was going on at the ICC
- outreach work in different parts of the community.

These activities have been undertaken since the ICCs were established. Some ICCs have been more focused than others on raising their profile within the community and raising awareness of their activities. For example, one of the ICCs has been supported by the local authority to develop a new logo and has funded a variety of awareness-raising activities. It also intends to erect new signage around the centre itself using Cymorth money.

The most effective marketing tool is word of mouth and personal recommendation. One manager described how ‘parents tell other parents and invite their friends along’. This fosters a sense of community ownership of the centre which was identified as important at the outset of the research.

Where community ownership of the centres is more developed, community residents engage more with the ICC and those most in need of the services take them up to a greater extent. ICC users report feeling increasingly comfortable attending the centres over time and their initial feelings of apprehension are dispelled. Levels of vandalism and misuse of the centres decrease, and residents come to value them and perceive them as a significant asset to their community.

4.2 Changes to mission and needs analysis

ICCs were originally funded by BIG to compliment other support for early years provision, such as Local Authority and Cymorth funding.

ICCs were expected to contribute towards open access play for children of a wide range of ages and to contribute towards community regeneration, in particular by contributing to the education, training and re-skilling agenda.

When they were built, a range of local stakeholders were consulted about the location and structure of the ICCs and the services that were provided. The development of the ICCs was led by Children and Young People's Partnerships (CYPPs).

The early stages of the findings from the research highlight the importance of on-going needs analysis in to update and ensure the relevance of activities. These have been conducted by the ICCs, though not to the same extent as those undertaken when the ICCs had been established. Formal surveys of the needs of individual localities have been undertaken. These have included Childcare Sufficiency Audits which have measured demand in relation to provision. For example, in one area the Audit highlighted the need for more provision for babies, and the ICC was working with the relevant LA to address the issue.

Links with community organisations and surveys of clients and the wider community are used by ICC staff to inform their understanding of local needs. For example, two ICCs use questionnaire based surveys which are designed to obtain the views of parents and children about what they would like to see provided at the ICC along with other issues. One ICC focuses on meeting specific identified needs and marketing how its activities meet these needs rather than generic marketing to the local community.

The ICCs work in partnership with regeneration schemes, such as the Communities First groups that are set up in the most deprived electoral wards in Wales. These organisations have developed Community Action Plans (CAPs) which include a role for the ICCs. The ICCs' own developmental planning is informed by wider regeneration initiatives. ICCs have utilised surveys undertaken by other service providers to inform their needs analysis and planning activities.

ICCs also include community representatives on their management boards who act as conduits between the centres and the local community. Good practice was observed where ICCs have been able to engage with community representatives who are in touch with a wide range of local people and groups. This facilitates informal dialogue which often underpins ICCs' understanding of local needs.

4.3 Nature and outcomes of monitoring and inspection

Centres continue the practice observed at the outset of the research of compiling and reporting usage figures. They collect qualitative data about their impact on children and families. However, hard quantitative data about the ICCs' wider social and economic impact remains limited.

A range of activities are undertaken to monitor the work of the four ICCs. These involve bodies including Local Authorities; Local Health Boards (LHBs), the Care and Social Services Inspectorate for Wales (CSSIW) and Estyn, Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Wales. The CSSIW continues to monitor the centres' activities. ICCs reported that where inspections had taken place the outcomes have been very positive. The Open Access Play sites, which are now present at three of the case study ICCs, have also been inspected with positive conclusions. The Local Authorities have also monitored the ICCs' activities. Local Authority staff observe early years provision in each of the ICCs. However, ICC staff emphasised that these were developmental activities designed to improve provision as part of quality assurance procedures rather than formal inspections. Health-related aspects of the early years work, such as the food content and healthy living education, are monitored by LHBs.

Local Authorities also monitor the professional development opportunities for ICC staff who are involved in delivering Foundation Phase provision. The ICCs are also aware that their early years provision could be inspected by Estyn.

ICCs staff are engaged in independent evaluation activities that are related to researching the impact of the ICCs. For example, one ICC worker has been asked by the manager to become involved with a Higher Education (HE) institution that are undertaking a qualitative assessment of the impact of the ICC on children's development.

4.4 Changes to staffing profile

ICCs experience a range of staffing issues, and some staff shortages have been reported. In some centres, a high turnover of staff has been experienced due to the insecurity of short-term funding or because funding has been discontinued. For example, it was reported that some staff have left one ICC of their own accord because the ICC could not provide a guarantee of work over the long term. In that ICC those who have left have not been replaced. Clearly, there is a need for multi-year funding for ICCs to ensure low levels of staff turnover and higher levels of staff retention.

In one of the ICCs where changes have been made to the staffing profile it is intended that eight members of the LA staff will be based at the ICC, of whom three will have a specific role related to it. These will include a part-time training and grants officer and part-time administrator.

A more stable position is evident in the other two ICCs. Staff turnover was reported to be low or at an acceptable level. In some cases the ICCs have continued to nurture their own staff by encouraging people who had started as parent volunteers to become paid members of staff.

5. Provision of services for children

5.1 Childcare

Overall, the childcare needs of the local communities are being met by the ICCs. In most ICCs, childcare is expanding, and changes in the amount of provision were noted during the visits, sometimes in response to childcare sufficiency assessments and the need to provide more flexible holiday provision. In one ICC, childcare services have been extended to cover holiday periods. In a second ICC, provision has been increased to take account of additional need in the locality. In a third case, the centre intends to establish a morning childcare group depending on demand. The fourth ICC intends to build a daycare unit on the site. The costs will be funded by Sure Start capital grant money which will provide day-long or ‘wrap-around’ day care for children aged from three months. Another local childcare provider has closed and the additional capacity at the ICC is anticipated to help to address the gap in service availability created by this.

However, there is concern about the sustainability of some of the existing childcare provision. ICCs are concerned that in some areas it will be not be sustainable without additional time-specific grants. Those centres do not believe that the provision would survive if parents are required to meet its full cost. At the same time, despite the increases in play and after-school clubs, provision for 11 to 14 year olds remains limited.

5.2 Early years

The ICCs play a role in the delivery of early years provision which in some cases is linked to the Flying Start initiative. In one of these examples, the ICC is considering developing outreach work in a particular part of the town in order to maximise engagement. This will represent a move to a more ‘networked’ type of provision similar to that which exists in one of the case studies. In some centres the number of early years sessions has increased.

One ICC is piloting the ‘Healthy Early Years’ scheme which has resulted in new equipment and resources that are tailored to support its delivery. These include ‘Jeff

the Chef” (a chef model/puppet) and a ‘Busy Feet’ DVD which focuses on healthy eating and exercise.

Good practice was observed where schools link with ICCs to provide a seamless early years experience. Although the institutions are distinct, schools work with the ICCs to promote continuity of experiences and to begin to develop children’s familiarity with school expectations. Schools are convinced that the children have benefited from this and that their social skills and ability to learn have been supported.

5.3 Open Access Play

Open Access Play is defined by the WAG in its National Minimum Standards for Play Provision (2006) in the following way.

‘Open Access Play Provision may be permanent or short-term schemes and generally cater for older children. However, children aged five to seven years may attend. The main purpose of the provision is to enable children to learn and develop through play opportunities in a safe environment in the absence of their parents’ (p. 1).

Play Wales have since built on this definition to offer a more detailed description of Open Access Play:

‘Open Access play provision can be permanent or short-term provision, located in a variety of settings with or without premises including play centres, adventure playgrounds, play schemes and parks. Whilst the term Open Access applies to registered provision for children under 8 years, such provision usually caters for a wide age range of children...

The purpose of the provision is to provide staffed play opportunities for children in the absence of their parents. Children are not restricted in their movements, other than where related to safety matters and are not prevented from coming and going as and when they wish. Children have the freedom of choice as to what range of play activity they wish to undertake and with whom they play’ (Play Wales, 2006).

During the first and second phases of the research, Open Access Play was identified as one of the weaker areas of provision in two of the ICCs. This was a matter of concern for one of the national organisations that had been involved in developing the notion of ICCs.

Several stakeholders emphasise the importance of independent, self-directed play opportunities as a means of maximising the benefit children and young people gain from the ICCs and also as a means of reaching those who might not engage with other aspects of their provision.

Three of the ICCs have carried out activities to develop their Open Access Play provision. One ICC operates from four sites, all of which have Open Access Play facilities. A member of staff has been appointed to work solely on play. This is linked to play outreach work. It is noted that more facilities are required because of the demand for the provision. In another ICC the centre is visited by an Open Access Play coordinator who is developing the provision to maximise the use of the ICC's own Open Access Play facilities and others in the area.

In this case, the Open Access Play team are sponsored through a consortium that includes the LA and a range of other sources and work to develop outdoor and Open Access Play opportunities for children. The ICC is working with them to maximise the opportunities for the children to enjoy Open Access Play. They have consulted with children about where they want to play and what facilities they want and have involved schools to identify where the children like to play.

The children have chosen a site that is separate from the ICC because the centre is perceived to be too close to the school for them to enjoy the Open Access Play there. The manager notes that 'The location of the adventure play site is not on the same site as the ICC ... children don't like to play at school- school is school for a lot of children'. The fourth ICC refers to activities which have been arranged during the summer and are delivered on an open-access basis. Stakeholders in the area are examining different ways of expanding play opportunities.

A further ICC is looking to develop Open Access Play provision on another site as part of its move to promote engagement in an area that would benefit from its presence. This involves outreach techniques to build on the ICC's capacity and expertise.

Open Access Play opportunities are provided for children across three of the sites in after school and on weekends in term time. During the school holidays, the range of provision is expanded throughout the day. A voluntary organisation plays a significant role in the Open Access Play provision at one of the ICCs, employing play workers and coordinating aspects of the planning and delivery alongside the ICC manager.

Trips such as those to indoor play centres and campsites are carried out during the holidays to a greater extent in two of the longer-established ICCs. In one of the ICCs where children were taken on a summer camping/outward-bound trip as part of the Open Access Play element, staff and volunteers expressed how much they had enjoyed the experience in addition to the children.

Although opportunities for children to engage in Open Access Play at the ICCs have improved over the course of the study, children are not receiving their full entitlements to this provision at one of the centres. This is related to a perceived lack of space to develop Open Access Play facilities on the ICC site. Plans are in place to develop some satellite Open Access Play provision in the area, although this would be on a separate site from the ICC.

5.4 Training for parents

Training for parents remains a central role for the ICCs. The type of activities provided include:

- Work undertaken as part of the ‘Team Around the Child’ (TAC) approach where support is delivered to families as part of a wider programme
- Work tailored specifically to support lone parents through advice and guidance on issues like getting back to work, which involves initiatives like the Genesis programme
- The provision of Parents Information Points (PIPs) to provide parents with information about available services
- Providing facilities for Further Education (FE) providers to deliver training and courses
- Providing facilities for courses in areas like financial literacy, basic skills and parenting
- Providing a venue and facilities for work with fathers to discuss experiences and learn skills such as cookery
- Nurturing parenting skills in areas such as soft play, outside play, painting, and craft ideas such as junk modelling.

This shows that the ICCs are providing a comprehensive range of training services to parents that aim to improve their social, practical and technical skills.

A number of ICCs are working with users to identify and deliver a wide range of courses at different times in the day, based on their resources. The specific nature of the courses and qualifications offered at the ICCs varies, but include debt management/financial literacy, child care, play work, Information Technology (IT), basic literacy and numeracy, cookery, and Welsh. Take up levels of all courses are good, and there is a greater desire for more Welsh language courses.

A number of the ICCs are providing a base for the provision of adult social, practical and technical skills training. This is planned or delivered jointly by agencies working to re-engage or support disadvantaged groups. The ICCs are working in partnership with agencies including WAG initiatives, Job Centre Plus, and LA family support services to provide training to local adults.

For example, in one ICC area an LA parenting strategy includes a new programme called 'Strengthening Families' which will be piloted through the ICC. This will work with parents of children aged 10-14 to share experiences and discuss coping skills. Several ICCs are also delivering the Incredible Years course which aims to ensure consistency of approach to caring for young children across the home and school environments.

Although there is anecdotal evidence that individuals accessing training at ICCs have continued to study more formal courses at a higher level, evidence of progression is limited. However, stakeholders emphasise the importance of the type of community-based courses that are delivered at the ICCs in developing parenting skills and confidence, and in addressing a range of social issues.

One ICC is concerned that some of the services being delivered are not used to the same extent as in the past. This is being reviewed in order to ensure that the range of service provision continues to meet the needs of the community.

One of the centres is aiming to become an NVQ training centre. Staff have applied to become NVQ assessors in order to develop their work with parents. There is some concern about the details of the financial support that is available to parents, including conditions of Flying Start funding.

6. Impact

Throughout the present study, information has been gathered from those interviewed relating to the diverse range of ways in which the ICCs have impacted on the children, parents and families who have used their services, and on the communities in which they are based. These findings have been overwhelmingly positive. The case-study ICCs are located in some of the most deprived electoral wards in the UK, where there are serious health and social problems. Interviewees perceive that some of these problems are starting to be addressed through the services provided at the ICCs. Children, parents and families most in need of these services are becoming more aware of their existence and the ways in which they can help them to improve their prospects in life.

6.1 Monitoring impact

Throughout the ICCs, impact is measured using a range of formal and informal methods, although informal, ad-hoc techniques tend to be employed to a greater extent.

Parents using the ICCs are consulted verbally by ICC staff about their opinions on the nature and extent of the available provision more generally, or in relation to a specific initiative, course or programme delivered at or through the ICC. Children using the ICC's range of facilities are also asked for their opinions on their value, effectiveness, and fitness for purpose, but seem to be consulted less extensively than parents and carers. Written information from ICC users is not widely gathered because of the literacy issues which affect a significant proportion of them.

In one ICC, feedback forms have formerly been used on an annual or bi-annual basis to ascertain the impact of provision on users. Concise, user-friendly forms have been designed by the ICC manager for child and adult users. This activity has not been conducted during the current year due to staff shortages, however. The feedback obtained from ICC users through the forms has been overwhelmingly positive, and has also been used to shape the services available at the centres in accordance with the needs and wishes of users.

A lack of provision for fathers at some of the ICCs was identified during the previous case-study visit through verbal and written consultations with ICC users in another area. In response to this, a Father's Coordinator has since been employed at this ICC, who fulfils a multi-faceted role including facilitating fathers' participation in family life, advocating on their behalf, and leading parenting skills workshops aimed specifically at fathers.

Teachers at primary schools linked to the ICCs notice significant developmental gains in children who have used the ICC's childcare, open access play and early years facilities relative to their peers who have not.

Other interviewees report on the value of observing the children, young people and families who come to the ICC for ascertaining where services are required in order to facilitate positive impacts. This is highlighted by the following quotation from the manager of one ICC, who stated that

'[The ICC] is a good information point. We pick up issues that wouldn't be picked up otherwise because they come to the centre'.

In some cases, social and health problems among ICC users like inappropriate or unacceptable behaviour, substance abuse, and parents' apparent difficulty in coping with their children have been observed by staff. In response to this, social workers have started to use a room at two of the ICCs, and in another area, a health visitor holds timetabled sessions at the ICC to assist parents in need of their support and guidance.

The continuation of funding from local authorities and other sources such as the Cymorth grant and the Flying Start and Sure Start initiatives is dependent on the collection and submission of data from ICC staff and users. Usage figures for every ICC service along with other information such as user's ethnicity, gender, age, and address is submitted for this purpose, along with impact-related feedback from ICC users as gathered by the manager. ICC managers are required by the local authorities to submit quarterly monitoring reports which contain similar types of information. These accountability processes are virtually unchanged throughout the study.

Formal evaluation of the childcare element of the ICC's provision is carried out on an annual basis by the CSSIW, in line with their legal responsibility to this end. Similarly, Estyn inspects the ICC's early years education provision. Each of the case-

study ICCs is subject to evaluations via these methods and no action points or negative impacts have been identified as a consequence.

Introducing more formal procedures for the collection and use of 'hard' data to support subjective judgements of the various impacts induced by the ICCs is a future goal of an ICC manager and board members in one ICC area. Through doing so, the ICC's impacts would be measured more systematically and accurately. This information would then be fed into accountability procedures to secure additional funding.

Little progress has been made towards making this a reality over the course of the study, despite the increase in need to demonstrate the positive impacts of the ICC on children, parents, families and the communities in which they are located.

The numerous staffing changes at this ICC may have affected the propensity to implement these practices, in addition to staff and board member's lack of experience in data processing and analysis. Attributing any gains in children's progress solely to the work of the ICC could prove difficult.

6.2 Impact on services and partnership working

The ICCs have impacted positively on local services in a number of ways. Multi-agency working is more effective and 'seamless' through the co-location of services at the ICCs, and the initial difficulties around forming common working practices to deliver services at or through the ICCs are now on the whole resolved.

Inter-agency information sharing practices are more effective through the increased frequency of meetings and through the concurrent building of trust between service providers. The possibility of initial competition developing between ICC service providers has not materialised.

In some areas, more formal parameters for collaboration and information sharing between different service providers at the ICCs are in place. 'Partnership' or 'core element' meetings are now held at every case-study ICC, which facilitates these processes. As a health visitor commented in relation to the meetings,

'Everyone discusses well together. Everyone can make suggestions and all suggestions are respected and considered'.

Further collaborative planning between childcare providers and the primary schools with which some of the ICCs were affiliated is in evidence. This enhances the already positive relationships between the schools and the ICCs and assists in the early detection of and intervention for behavioural, learning or social problems.

Generic training sessions such as health and safety, risk assessment and child protection tend to be shared to a greater extent than in the past between staff and voluntary agencies with distinct roles in the ICCs. This practice is beneficial to a number of staff, and also has implications for cost-effectiveness.

Some staff report that they felt more able to signpost ICC users to other services through sharing such training, and also as a consequence of the better understanding of the roles and remits of the other ICC services gain through attending partnership and planning meetings.

The following comments from a range of staff illustrate the heightened inter-agency collaboration and mutual understanding between services provided at the ICCs which have developed since the centre's inception.

'Last time [the core element meeting] was really beneficial because child protection came up. We work with many of the same parents and children so we could share information within the group. It is growing; I was concerned before that we weren't connecting but it is better now. There are staff who come on the play training and the manager encourages children to use the open access play site. It has definitely developed'.

Play leader

'The impact [on partner organisations] has been pretty good. We invite other organisations to the 'come and play' groups to work with the children and parents. Quite often the Family Information Service comes in and tells parents what's available in the area. We work with Genesis, Communities First, Job Centre Plus, and the Parent Network, which sets up a coffee afternoon every Tuesday. We have just started working with the Citizen's Advice Bureau...other organisations are welcome to come in and use our room...communication is good with partner organisations. We share information...so that we don't duplicate provision. Also, if there is a child in need of our services who is not living in a Flying Start area, they can come here - we share information with the Flying Start team'.

ICC manager

'Collaborative working is excellent between the partners...Everyone is easily accessible – we don't like to say no. The [ICC community] Early Years Forum holds meetings here which are disseminated across the community'.

Child care manager

‘The staff build up really good relationships with the kids. When they get older the staff signpost them towards the youth services. The young people choose to go to the staff if they have any issues. We have had to train them in areas like sexual health and smoking, et cetera. Although that is not strictly the play agenda, better for them to go to a member of staff who is willing to help them rather than going to someone else who will say, “I don’t deal with that”’.

Play leader

Some more mixed evidence around partnership working is present, however.

Whilst relations and partnership working between the local authority and the ICCs are generally good, recent funding cuts which affect the services provided have increased tensions in one ICC.

Sharing good practice between ICCs has improved in most of the case-study areas. ICC managers have visited other centres around the country to meet with the managers and staff there. Discussions have ensued about issues which have arisen and their resolution, and aspects of the ICC’s provision and management which have worked particularly well. This has provided some useful practical information for managers, some of which they have put into practice at their own ICCs.

A manager at one of the longer-established case-study ICCs has recently developed an ICC ‘Tool Kit’, which is a guidance handbook containing examples of good practice for new ICC managers and practitioners founding new ICCs.

Managers value the ICC manager’s meetings, which are convened by Children in Wales, as they provide the opportunity to ‘learn lessons’ and to develop positive working relationships with other managers. However, some issues surrounding the meetings are perceived by ICC managers. Releasing managers to attend the meetings can be problematic, particularly when meetings are held some distance away. Some manager’s meetings have also been cancelled, reportedly due to a lack of prospective attendees. A disproportionately heavy focus on funding issues is perceived by one manager to detract from the meeting’s worth. The following quotations from a sample of the ICC managers interviewed reflect the perceived value of the meetings in addition to their drawbacks.

‘We get together for the ICC support meetings and speak to the other coordinators. The last one we had was in April and it was really

interesting...The meetings are really good because we can support each other and if there is anything we need to bring up there are other people who might have been through things and can help us with them’.

‘I have only ever been to two meetings since they began because there is not the capacity to release me for the day or two days if the meeting is in [a different part] of Wales...Also, during the meetings we always get bogged down with discussing funding issues which detracts from their value’.

6.3 Impact on children

Children attending the ICCs enjoy doing so, and outline a range of ways in which the ICCs benefit them. Their parents and carers also report that coming to the ICCs helps to secure wide-ranging gains in the children’s development. These are sentiments which are echoed by teachers in the primary schools linked to the ICCs, volunteers, board members, ICC managers and staff alike.

Social and cognitive skills

The ICC’s services are seen by staff, parents and carers to have enhanced children’s social and cognitive skills. Attending the open access play, child care, and parent and toddler group elements are seen to have facilitated these aspects of their development.

Children are more sociable and interact in a more mature and appropriate way with peers, older children and adults. Sharing toys and books, using more sophisticated language, improved manners and politely asking staff for their assistance with activities are cited by parents and volunteers as examples of the gains in the children’s social and cognitive development.

These impacts tend to increase in proportion with the amount of time the children spend at the ICCs, and/or with the range of different services they access. In addition to the benefits induced by the services themselves, the dedication and support of ICC staff are linked by interviewees to children’s gains in social and cognitive skills.

Parents comment on the positive and encouraging approach of ICC staff towards both them and their children, and feel that this has enhanced the impact of the services provided by them. Implementing a ‘no smacking’ policy at one ICC’s parent and toddler group is one example of such a positive development.

Bringing children to the ICC also helps to foster more positive relationships between children and their parents. This is particularly apparent in larger families, for which coming to the ICCs provides a welcome break from the home environment.

‘You can come down, have a cup of tea, and interact with them. It makes them see you in a different light. You’re not the mean mummy who always says no, but they think you’re quite cool because you will do different things with them. You build a better bond with them, I suppose’.

Volunteer and parent

Where similar facilities have been used by parents in the past, those available at the ICCs compare favourably.

‘When I finally got the guts to come in here everyone was so nice and welcoming and they were great with the kids. It was not cliquey at all’.

‘I checked out other playgroups before coming here but this is different. You have a laugh’.

‘The staff here are great. I have never seen them being preachy like they can be in other places’.

Parent

Confidence and self-esteem

Children gain significantly in confidence and self-esteem through attending the ICCs, according to managers, staff and parents. The social interaction that the range of provision affords is at the heart of these developments. Children become more interested in playing and learning independently from their parents and siblings in after spending time at the ICCs. Several parents report that their children are now more outgoing and confident since coming to the centres partly as a result of being encouraged to try out new activities and meet new people.

Gains in confidence are attributed to the close and trusting relationships children build up with the ICC staff, often over a period of several years as the children progress through the different elements of the ICC's provision.

‘The centre is brilliant. It is a nice atmosphere, the staff are all lovely and they are great with the children. The children call them by their first names so they all feel more comfortable here. I have been coming here for a long time and have done lots of different things here...it has all been great’.

Parent accessing education through the ICC

‘Because we are based in a related environment where they feel comfortable to come in they just love it. Sometimes we get comments from children that they prefer to come here than to nursery...We have had children crying because they didn't want to leave’.

ICC manager

Interviewees feel that the open access play provision benefits children with additional or special needs in terms of boosting their confidence and willingness to interact with other children, as this statement illustrates.

‘One of the boys who has been coming from day one also attends the ICC after-school club. He has additional needs. When he started the adventure play he was very clingy to his mother and had no idea how to socialise with other children...he now has a much wider ability to mix with other children. He will ask the other kids if they want to play or if he can join in with them. He would never have done that before’.

Play leader

Readiness for school

The child care, early years education and open access play provision is all seen to have facilitated children's readiness for school. Strong links have been formed between the primary schools affiliated to or on the same site as the ICCs, onto which a high proportion of children who attend the ICCs progress. This provides continuity of learning through the Foundation Phase, which is maximised through the joint planning and review meetings now held between the managers, staff and school teachers at each of the case-study ICCs. These meetings represent an important development over the course of the study.

Activities like drawing and painting, craft work, writing on chalk boards, homework clubs and generally learning through play boost the children's development in this way according to primary school teachers, ICC managers and staff.

Low levels of literacy are prevalent among some of the parents who bring their children to the ICC. These parents are less able to support the range of skills required to prepare their children for starting school, but the ICCs compensate in part for this.

The child care, parent and toddler, and after school provision at the ICCs help children in need of language support in particular. Where children have specific or pronounced difficulties, ICC staff share this information with the school to enable them to receive the support they are likely to need upon arrival. A primary school teacher made the following comment to this effect:

'We have some children with very little language coming up to school. The staff sing them nursery rhymes and they play games to develop number skills. Their parents can't teach them that if they aren't literate...I just found out last week that one of the parents was illiterate, and I had known them for nine years and didn't realise. It's something that doesn't crop up until you ask a specific question or until they decide to tell you. As a way of communicating to anticipate what is coming through to us further on in the school, the links are great. The integration is great'.

Behaviour and conduct

In two areas, older children are seen by volunteers, staff and board members to naturally adopt a mentoring role for younger children through their interactions at an open access play site. The older children help their younger counterparts to learn and understand the repercussions of inappropriate behaviour, which in turn facilitates the exhibition of better behaviour. One play worker partly attributes children's improved

behaviour to their ownership of the site which has been instigated by their involvement in its construction. The following quotations illustrate these points.

‘There is not so much trouble down here. It is quite a relaxed area for them. The children have made their own rules here. We have to enforce some of the rules, but most of them will curb their language without being asked’.

Volunteer

‘Their behaviour towards the play workers and towards each other has got better over time. The big ones will keep the little ones in line – they will tell them off for swearing and bad behaviour. They learn respect for their property through the self-build concept. They know that if they wreck it, they won’t get it back’.

Play worker

Some parents also note that their children’s behaviour improves through attending the ICCs, in addition to some of the children themselves. One eight-year old boy attending the after-school provision at an ICC explains how going there helps him to behave better, which has the additional benefit of encouraging the development of positive relationships with others.

‘You have more friends if you behave yourself. If you are naughty, you won’t have any friends and no-one will like you’.

Eight year old boy

The centre’s focus on improving parenting skills underpins children’s behavioural improvements, according to a teacher at the primary school affiliated to one ICC. The ICC staff’s approach to demonstrating balanced, positive discipline is seen to be at the heart of these developments, as the following comment illustrates.

‘Obviously they have good discipline here and good systems so the children are used to them. Then when they come through [to the primary school], the systems are followed on and that works well. You will always have some little blighter every now and again but that’s life. At least for them they are used to having other people telling them what to do when sometimes their parents won’t correct them in the right way – being too harsh or maybe not taking any notice of them at all. The children have the benefits from that and they are going to improve from that point’.

Play worker

6.4 Bilingual development

The extent to which the bilingual development of children, parents and carers, and others in the community is influenced through attending the ICC varies in accordance with the amount of Welsh naturally spoken in the areas in which the ICCs are based.

Two of the case-study ICCs are located in areas where Welsh is the main language or where a large proportion of people speak or understand it. These centres hold the greatest amount of Welsh-medium activities including Welsh medium play and mother and toddler groups, early years education and courses for parents, which are all well-attended. They are consequently seen to exert the greatest influence on the bilingual development of children and others in the community.

In the remaining two ICCs, several interviewees express the need for more Welsh courses for parents and staff. There, many children learning the language in school are able to speak and understand it to a higher standard than their parents and the ICC staff. Parents and staff consequently feel less able to support the children in progressing with their Welsh, which is seen as a disadvantage.

Attempts have been made in both of these areas to widen the range of Welsh medium provision for parents and children. Welsh language play groups were started, but attendance had been inconsistent. Managers feel that this is linked to the small proportion of parents in the area who are able to speak and understand Welsh. Welsh language advisory teachers work jointly with the ICC and with the primary schools affiliated to them in one case-study area. This has raised awareness among staff of how to better incorporate the Welsh language into activities for parents and children.

Children of Eastern European immigrants who have moved into to one of the ICC areas now attend an open access play site. Through the social interaction that play affords, the local children have learned some words in the newcomer's native languages. Staff and volunteers there feel that this has enhanced the children's social and linguistic skills.

6.5 Diet and health

Healthy eating and awareness of health issues are actively promoted at all of the ICCs visited. Additional grant funding is secured and used in two of the centres to implement health promoting activities such as preparing and distributing fruit and purchasing additional play and exercise equipment.

Parents, staff and children feel that the children's knowledge and understanding of health issues has improved through the ICC's focus. For instance, when asked what they had learned about health and healthy eating through the ICC, comments from children included the following:

'You should eat less fat and sugar, and more fruit. You shouldn't eat junk food'.

'You need to get plenty of exercise and run a lot'.

'We learned about the five-a-day'.

'We made fruit kebabs'.

A small allotment is present in a fenced area within an open access play site. Staff and volunteers help children to grow and harvest a range of vegetables from seed on this land, which the children find enjoyable. Parents also take an interest in these activities which help to engage their children. The allotment facilitates learning about the origins of food and also about the role of vegetables in promoting a healthy diet, about which they may not otherwise be aware. A volunteer hoped that this experience had helped to foster ownership of the site among the children.

'We have done cooking with them. We had a vegetable patch where the children grew their own veg. I made soup out of them and brought it down for the children here. Whatever was left we took to the café [in the community] and sold it there...It is good for children to see things grown from seed. Some only see food from the supermarket and don't understand where it comes from. The parents took an interest in the vegetables growing too. We hope the kids will get involved with the community allotment now they have been taught to look after their vegetables. They would not vandalise it'.

Volunteer

One site has won a national award for the range of health-promoting activities it offers. This centre is also involved with a local health board-led pilot scheme which

aims to raise parent's awareness of health issues and healthy lifestyles in order to improve the health of their young children.

Through this scheme, several health-related activities are carried out and more are planned for the few months following the final case-study visit. These include themed exercise sessions and an educational visit from a dentist. In addition, several members of staff at this ICC have completed the OCN Community Health training, which is seen by the manager to enhance their ability to promote healthy living among the children and families using the ICCs.

6.6 Open access play

The open access play element of the ICC's provision is linked to a wider range of benefits for children, parents and the communities than any other type of provision.

Through play, children learn boundaries, and respect for their community and for others. Inclusion and tolerance are promoted, the impact of which is particularly marked in the most deprived ICC communities. Relations between different parts of the community are reported by play leaders, workers, volunteers and board members at two of the ICC sites to have improved since the ICC's inception, as the activities serve to bring together the residents of these different areas who previously had little contact.

'At first, [community A] children would come down into the [community B-based] site and the local children would say, "What are you doing here? You're a [colloquial name for the residents of community A]", and we would question why they said that. They would reply that they didn't know – it was from their parents. Because of the rolling programme we have in the holidays, children mix far more now and it is not an issue...A lot of these kids will end up in the same high school and they will already know each other through the play programmes. This helps remove the cultural divide and is one less issue for them to deal with'.

Play Manager

Open access play is perceived by interviewees to have a pronounced impact on children's physical health, but staff do not actively promote the health benefits of play to children in order to increase their engagement in it. Children naturally engage in

and enjoy the open access play facilities at the ICCs, and the physical health benefits are a secondary effect of that, as these comments highlight.

‘Play in general helps with fitness. Running around playing army for six hours is a lot of exercise. They burn off all their energy here’.

Volunteer

‘Children are naturally very physical in play. They get engrossed in the things they do. We don’t tell them about things like obesity – playing is so good for that’.

Play leader

All children are able to participate in open access play, regardless of any disabilities or problems they may have. Several interviewees note that children who are known to have experienced abuse within their families or have other serious problems have benefitted from the emotional expression that open access play affords them.

‘Through inclusion rather than exclusion they have improved so much and will now interact with all the other kids and adults. You can sit down and have an interesting conversation with them rather than them throwing stones at you and swearing at you’.

Play worker

‘In a community like this children are just allowed out to play. You can really see how beneficial play can be for individual children. There are children from a family who have been through some trauma recently, and through the play they play out a lot of their fears and worries. I think in the community where there are quite a few families like that [who] need it’.

Play leader

Parents and play staff at two of the ICCs visited feel that the impact of the open access play provision at the ICCs could be increased through taking children and families out on trips more frequently. Trips are organised in the school summer holidays such as camping and outward-bound activities which are enjoyed by staff, volunteers and children alike, but increasing the range of these activities would benefit children even further. It is not possible to achieve this at present, however, due to funding constraints.

6.7 Impact on parents and families

Parents and families benefit from the ICCs in many ways. Co-locating services within an easily accessible and non-threatening environment is fundamental to the high and increasing use of the centres, according to ICC staff and managers. ICC staff also feel that signposting parents to other relevant services is also an important aspect of the role of the centres.

Some parents report initial feelings of apprehension prior to their first visit to the ICCs partly because of past negative experiences of accessing services and/or of formal education. Their apprehension has declined over time and with increased contact with the centres. Some parents state that the friendly, approachable demeanour of the ICC managers and staff encourages them to return to the centres.

Bringing their children to the ICCs helps to reduce the stress of family life for some parents, particularly those with larger families. The fact that services such as child care and open access play can be accessed at the ICCs free of charge or with minimal financial contributions is important to parents and a major determinant of their visits to the centres. This comment from a parent volunteer illustrates this point.

‘It is a big weight off their shoulders because they are trying to find things for their children to do with not enough money. A lot of things cost money these days. But here you know they are safe, happy and well. You know what they are up to’.

The fees for child care and attending the parent and toddler groups have doubled in one of the ICC areas between the second and final round of fieldwork due to reductions in local authority core and Flying Start funding. This has affected some families, as a parent outlined:

‘The prices have gone up since last year. It was 30p per session and now its 75p. That may not sound like a lot, but it is to a lot of people round here. We don’t have much money. There were times when I didn’t have 30p in my purse’.

Using the ICCs reduce the social isolation experienced by some parents. Over time, parents learn to trust the ICC staff, and feel reassured that their children are safe in their care.

The numbers of parents who participate in education, employment and training courses at or through the ICCs have increased over the course of the study. This is the most significant impact of the ICCs on parents and families. Without the services provided by the ICCs, many parents would not be able to take time away from their child care responsibilities and would consequently not be able to attend work or training courses.

Parents completing education and training courses at or through the ICCs report the additional benefits or improvements in self-esteem and confidence which compliment the skill sets learned as a consequence of the provision.

These comments made by a range of individuals linked to the ICC reflect the positive impact that the ICCs had on widening parent's work and training opportunities.

‘Before we opened there were a lot of parents who would not have been able to do it without us. It is good to be able to support the parents in the area’.

ICC manager

‘Without the wraparound I would not have been able to finish my education. I am a single mother and both of my parents work. Before the wraparound I had to put him in a crèche which was further away for two afternoons a week’.

Parent accessing education through an ICC

‘It has been fantastic. Quite a number of parents have continued their education. Some of them work here now. The facilities have facilitated them improving and moving on. Parents can fit in their working hours in much better by taking up the ICC's provision. Hardly anyone works in [the ICC community] - they all have to travel or catch trains. I am sure that they would have to work part time were it not for the ICC’.

Teacher at primary school affiliated to an ICC

During the first and second round of the fieldwork, several parents, staff members and service providers stated that the ICCs were almost exclusively attended by female parents or carers and that no services currently existed which were targeted at fathers. In three of the four ICCs this need has now been addressed.

One ICC has a father's support group, where eligible fathers are referred by the in-house health visitor. The support group has a holistic approach to supporting fathers which includes facilitating the development of skills like cooking and parenting, providing opportunities for group members to interact socially with other fathers, and hosting educational courses and visits.

In another ICC, an outreach worker has received training to deal specifically with fathers and the issues that they may face. Also at this ICC, a lone parent adviser who was also a qualified social worker has been newly appointed and is due to commence work in early 2010. Provision for fathers is still an outstanding need in one ICC, which some people raised again as an aspect for future development.

Improving the lives of local families A mother who recently moved to the area from abroad has been taking her two young children to the parent and toddler group at the ICC. She initially experienced open hostility from other local residents, who had also directed this at her children.

Staff at the ICC worked successfully with the mother and her children to help them integrate into the area and to make them feel welcome. Signposting to other services in the area has also been a key aspect of this. The ICC staff have also challenged the negative attitudes and behaviour of other local residents, which over time has changed. The mother now feels that her and her children have been accepted and included as part of the community. Through coming to the ICC she has formed friendships with other mothers, as have her children with their children. She said:

'I moved here from [my home country] a year ago. When I first started coming some people were not nice because we were new. Some people could be racist and I was scared. They wouldn't let my son play with their children. But the staff are very nice here; they encouraged me to talk to people and they are different towards us now. All the children play together. They are my family here now.'

6.8 Impact on the community and economy

Local community ownership of the centres and the services provided varies. The main factor identified by interviewees to have influenced the extent of community ownership is the length of time that the ICCs have been established. The extent to which communities have been consulted about and involved in the ICC's location, construction and service range is also closely related to community ownership.

In locations where there are low levels of community ownership of the ICCs there have been higher levels of vandalism. This was particularly apparent at open access play sites, which are less secure than the indoor provision. As a play worker said,

‘In the first few months we were open we had the fence burned down and fires being set in the playground, but we haven’t had that for the past 18 months. We had it almost weekly at first. That shows community ownership’.

ICC managers and staff make considerable efforts to encourage residents to use the centres and to consider them an important part of their communities. In two of the ICCs, adults and children resident in the area attend ICC board or management meetings, where they participate in decisions relating to the ICC’s services, activities and funding. Communities’ perceptions of their ownership of the ICCs is promoted through residents’ input into processes surrounding the ICC in this way.

In two of the ICC areas, staff express wishes for people living in the local area to become more involved with the ICC’s activities, such as volunteering at the Centres and being involved in management committees. In addition to increasing community ownership of the ICCs, staff feel that this could secure more resources to the centres through fundraising activities and applying for grant funding.

Strong levels of commitment to the communities and to improving residents’ future prospects through investing in services are observed among many ICC staff. This has remained constant throughout the duration of the study, despite the lack of job security and funding issues which are present in one ICC.

‘It has helped the community because the children are not walking the streets vandalising things. The parents know where their children are, who they are with, and what they are doing. They know they are doing something legal, not illegal’.

Parent and volunteer

We have a good partnership with the local police officers around here...that means that if they see kids in the street that can talk to them and say, "Come on, you don't want to do that". They have built up a friendship with them

Play worker

7. Sustainability

Staff and managers of all of the ICCs report concerns over their future sustainability, which have increased over the past 18 months. Concerns are focused around two related aspects - funding and staffing. All participants emphasised the range and magnitude of benefits of the ICCs, and the detrimental effects that closing the centres would have on the families that used them and on local communities.

Uncertainty over the continuation of funding from central and local sources and a subsequent over-reliance on relatively small grants affects all ICCs. Reduced and shorter-term funding have direct implications for the contracts and terms for staff employment at the ICCs, which have in some areas led to higher staff turnover and redundancies.

7.1 Funding

Each of the local authority areas in which the ICCs are based have experienced funding cuts as a result of the economic recession. This affects each of the ICC's funding situations differently. Two of the centres are in a more favourable financial position than the remaining two, one of which has faced the threat of permanent closure of some of its Open Access Play and child care provision.

One of the ICCs is better placed financially because the local authority has increased its funding allocation. This results in a wider range of services being provided from the centre, and the propensity to 'buy in' certain staff to deliver them in accordance with need. It also reduces the pressure caused by the uncertainty of the impending merging of the Cymorth grant into the Revenue Support Grant (RSG) which is scheduled to take place in 2011.

Cymorth funding is the 'bedrock' of funding for the remaining two ICCs. It has funded staff, facilities and activities, and has been 'crucial' to expanding the range of provision available at these centres. Without guaranteed amounts of Cymorth funding to support these aspects of the centre's functioning, their future appears uncertain to board members.

Funding from Sure Start, Flying Start and Communities First is fundamental to supporting the child care provision at the ICCs. However, the future of these sources

is also thought to be uncertain by board members, managers and staff. Reductions in Flying Start funding has already forced one ICC to increase fees for parents accessing childcare, which has made the provision harder for some parents to afford.

The range of services provided at most of the ICCs have been reduced over the course of the study due to the funding cuts. This has occurred despite an increased need for these services caused in part by the economic recession. Families living in the ICC areas are now under more strain from problems with debt, losing or being unable to find work, and difficulties affording childcare and commodities for their children. One manager stated that:

‘There are more pressures on the families which are accessing services more. They are struggling to access childcare due to availability and cost which leads them to leave their children alone or to leave them with friends as a form of informal childcare. They think that is ok. This is a barrier to get over’.

All of the ICCs actively investigate alternative sources of funding from the WAG and from charitable organisations. These monies have been used to support new initiatives like a Webster-Stratton parenting programme, a healthy living initiative, and indoor play equipment. Staff at most of the ICCs report that they have formulated grant applications collaboratively with charities and other service providers, many of which have been successful.

Staff, parents and volunteers point out that while grants have been valuable in extending the ICC’s provision, they could not generally be used to cover larger and more essential costs like staff wages and insurances, as the following comments reflect.

‘The smaller grants tend to pay for equipment, but we have so much equipment here we could do with the help with the wages’.

ICC manager

‘We are struggling at the moment. Last year Cymorth did not give an uplift so we are right at the limits of our budget. Most of the money in my budget goes on wages. The equipment budget always gets blasted but it is easier to get grants for...It’s important to attract high quality staff into post that can stay there. The children build up good relationships with the staff. They test the boundaries with a new person again too’.

Play leader

7.2 Staffing

The issues around the lack of guaranteed continued funding affect staffing levels at two of the ICCs, and are predicted to impact in this way in future in both of the other centres depending on the extent of the impending funding cuts made by central to local government. Virtually all of the ICC staff with the exceptions of the managers are employed on short-term contracts. This affects job security, and has caused the departure of several staff, which have left to pursue more secure alternative employment. Some who have left have not been replaced.

Higher staff turnover affects the development of relationships and trust between ICC staff and users, which staff have taken time and effort to build up. Fewer services are now offered at some of the ICCs due to the reductions in staffing, which has in turn reduced the impact of the provision.

Staff shortages have been dealt with temporarily through broadening the roles of volunteers at the sites, and encouraging new volunteers to join the team. Strong levels of commitment from existing staff are observed throughout the ICCs, and especially so in the centre which has been most affected by the recent funding reductions.

Paid staff have worked without pay for part of the time in order to sustain some of the ICCs’ provision, and volunteers were willing to increase the hours spent at the sites to enable the children there to receive the same entitlements as in previous years, as the following quote illustrates.

‘Existing staff work longer hours and do voluntary/unpaid overtime. Some activities are happening to a lesser extent than they used to...for example we don’t go on trips; parent’s education has been cut down. The activities that are outside working hours are staffed voluntarily’.

Child care manager

The impact on the communities would be great if the ICCs were discontinued. The improvements already made to the lives and wellbeing of children and families would

be curtailed, and it would be less likely that the perceived longer-term impact of breaking the cycles of deprivation present in the ICC communities would be achieved. Managers did not envisage any ICC closures to be impending in the near future, but the introduction of further funding cuts over the coming years may increase the likelihood of this becoming a reality.

